

| ENVIRONMENT |

In a verdict in 2012, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) of India, while suspending the environment clearance (EC) for a proposed coal-based thermal power plant near Pichavaram Mangrove forest in Cuddalore district of Tamil Nadu, directed the company to carry out a cumulative impact assessment study within a radius of 25 km from the project site. It also directed the Indian Ministry of Environment and Forest to initiate a 'carrying capacity study' in the region where a number of projects have been proposed in proximity to the Cuddalore Industrial Area and Pichavaram mangroves (*The Hindu*, May 25, 2012).

The tribunal in its verdict explained the importance of cumulative impact assessment studies in the following way: "We strikingly feel keeping in view the precautionary principle and sustainable development approach, cumulative impact assessment studies are required to be done in order to suggest adequate mitigative measures and environmental safeguards to avoid any adverse impacts on ecologically fragile eco-system of Pichavaram Mangroves and to the biological marine environment in the vicinity. We, therefore, direct that cumulative impact assessment studies be carried out by the Project Proponent especially with regard to the proposed Coal Based Power plant (2x660MW) of Cuddalore Power Company Ltd. and the Nagarjuna Oil Refinery and other industrial activities within a radius of 25 km from the power project..." (Green Tribunal, November 10, 2014).

While the Indian Green Tribunal recognises the importance of 'the precautionary principle and sustainable development approach' for any development project within 25 km of a small mangrove forest, the National Committee on Environment of Bangladesh, chaired by the prime minister Sheikh Hasina, did not hesitate to give clearance to 320 industrial projects within 10 km radius of the world's largest mangrove forest, the Sundarbans, without any cumulative impact assessment!

And in doing so, the highest government body to ensure environmental protection has even violated the Environment Conservation Act (1999) of the country, which declared the 10 km area surrounding the Sundarbans as an ecologically critical area (ECA). Setting up of any polluting industry is strictly prohibited in the ECA (*Refer Ecologically Critical Area Gazette*).

According to a report published in national daily, *Prothom Alo*, the National Committee on Environment, in its



DECLARING WAR AGAINST THE SUNDARBANS?

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meeting on August 6, 2017, issued permission to a total of 186 industrial projects which were there previously around the Sundarbans. Clearance of the other 118 industries—which had received preliminary clearance earlier—was also renewed. The committee also approved a total of 16 new industrial projects near the Sundarbans. Of them, eight are Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) plants that are known to create serious environmental degradation (*Prothom Alo*, August 11, 2017). The remaining eight are large and medium-scale industries.

From the very beginning, activists have predicted—and warned—that the Rampal Coal Power Plant is not the end, but just the beginning of a new 'land rush' around the Sundarbans region. Its establishment would attract other polluting industries, land speculators

and looters which would accelerate and intensify the ongoing degradation of the Sundarbans ecosystem. The evidence is already there, as reported by *The Daily Star* in 2016: "Powerful people are snapping up lands within the ECA to set up industries

(UNESCO) has also expressed its concern regarding industrial development near the Sundarbans several times. Emphasising the importance of cumulative impacts assessment, the UNESCO Reactive

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posing additional threats to the unique mangrove forest... Some of those investors are influential politicians or their kin who manage clearances for industry and are buying land like homesteads, wetland and crop fields. Already over 100 business groups and individuals have bought land in the ECA zone." (October 04, 2016).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

Monitoring Mission, after visiting and assessing the dangers of different industrial coastal development projects near the Sundarbans including Rampal Coal Power Plant, wrote in its report in 2016: "None of the relevant EIAs for these coastal developments take into account the cumulative effects of associated activities that come with the actual development. In

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